

A romantic couple embracing on a Parisian balcony. The woman is wearing a brown trench coat and a white turtleneck, and the man is wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt. They are standing on a balcony with a metal railing, overlooking a river and the Eiffel Tower in the background. The scene is set in Paris, France.

# *A French Affair*

*Lucy Felthouse*

**XCITE**  
*Romance* 

# **A FRENCH AFFAIR**

**An erotic novella**

**Lucy Felthouse**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

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# Chapter One

Sydney Tyler jumped so hard that her fingers slammed down onto the laptop's keyboard and she typed a bunch of gobbledegook.

*Kashfkjsdhlfknsdlfvn sdlkch awoeduioh ahdwklc*

Gasping, she clutched at her chest as her heart thumped rapidly and painfully. 'What the fucking hell was that?' she said to the empty room.

Pushing her chair back from the desk, she stepped over to the window. Peering out into the brilliant sunshine, she saw something on the lawn that she had absolutely not been expecting. Workmen.

She groaned. So much for her peaceful writer's retreat. She'd planned to get a good chunk of her novel down in the fortnight she was away, and now it looked as though her peace was going to be monumentally shattered by banging, drilling, and God knows what else.

Sighing, she gave the windowsill a pathetic thump in her frustration. She might have been pissed off, but she was no vandal. And besides, she didn't need those noisy buggers in her part of the building fixing things – having them next door was bad enough.

Sydney really could not believe her shitty luck. When she'd booked the cottage in the sleepy French village of Monthiers over the phone a couple of months ago, she'd dealt with a fellow Brit called Harry Bay, who she'd suspected was the owner. On arrival, though, a timid Frenchwoman had met her and let her into the luxurious barn conversion before handing over the keys and explaining a little bit about the local area. Apparently, in the mornings, someone came along the village streets, selling fresh bread and pastries.

There wasn't much else to tell, it seemed, as the village contained nothing except a church – almost opposite her accommodation – and a tavern. It was also lacking – she'd quickly discovered – a mobile signal. Not even a single bar illuminated her screen. Her phone was now no more than a watch, alarm clock, and calendar. If there was an emergency, she was screwed. But on a much lighter note, it was one less distraction. She could just get on with what she was here to do, blissfully undisturbed.

The arrival of workmen was incredibly irritating. Her temporary landlord hadn't mentioned there'd be anyone working next door. If he had, she wouldn't have booked the place – the quiet and idyllic location were the whole reason for choosing this property, this area. Even though there was no way he could have known she was there to work, common courtesy would dictate that he told her. Perhaps he was just interested in taking her money and didn't give a damn about whether she had a satisfactory stay or not. There was nothing to be done about it now, unfortunately. She'd paid for the fortnight, and she was bugged if she was going to cut and run, pissing that money down the drain. She'd just have to find a way around the disturbance, and console herself that she could leave a snarky write-up on a tourist review site when she got home.

Finding out the builders' working hours would be a good start – she could attempt to write around them then. Or perhaps she could make use of the headphones she'd stuffed into her case, without ever thinking they'd get used. Some loud rock music would drown out the din from next door and hopefully allow her to work. It was worth a try. She hoped they were only doing a small job that would take no more than a couple of days, but deep down she knew they weren't. They were renovating the whole place so it was as beautiful as the half she was in.

She was just about to go in search of those headphones when one of the men pottering around on the lush back garden stepped away from the others. Standing in a shaft of sunlight, he pulled his arms high above his head and stretched, dragging up his T-shirt to reveal a lean stomach with a fine line of dark hair leading enticingly into the waistband of his jeans.

Oh yum, she thought, perhaps having builders next door wouldn't be so bad after all. Especially if they all looked like him. She continued to stare as the man dropped his arms to his sides and watched the others. His dark hair was overlong and stuck out at crazy angles, as though he'd been running his fingers through it. She couldn't see the colour of his eyes from this distance, but she could make out enough detail of his features to see that he was handsome. Gorgeous, actually. Close up he could be much less attractive, but from her upstairs window, the view was pretty fine.

Just then, he glanced across at her side of the long barn, which was divided into two holiday cottages. He caught sight of her standing there, and his face dropped. He looked back at the builders, then returned his gaze

to her again. Pointing at the group of noisy men, he slapped his forehead with his other hand. Finally, he pointed at his chest, then up at her. He was indicating he wanted to come in. She paused, then nodded. Common sense told her she shouldn't be letting a strange man into her temporary home, but then, there were several large, bulky men milling around, so if they were a dodgy lot, she and the locked door would have no chance against them, especially with no means of calling for assistance. She could scream, of course, but she doubted anyone would come. The walls of the building were extremely thick – though sadly, no match for banging and drilling – the nearest house was a little way down the road, and by day, the village streets were all but deserted. There was only one business that she knew of – the tavern – so the other inhabitants would have to go elsewhere to work. To nearby Chateau-Thierry, perhaps, or even further afield.

She'd just have to hope that the handsome man – probably the head honcho of their group – was also a decent one. Presumably they were a reputable company, as they'd been hired by the British owners, who were usually more wary of cowboy builders, and given the horror stories and dedicated TV programmes back home, it was understandable.

Before she got even halfway down the stairs, a knock came at the door. OK, so he was polite enough to knock; that was good. She moved a little faster, careful not to trip in her flip-flops and go hurtling downwards. Once she was safely on the ground floor, she twisted the key in the door and opened it.

'Hi,' she said, glad she'd spoken before she'd looked at him properly. He would definitely have distracted her enough that even the tiny two-letter word would have had trouble making its way out of her mouth. She'd been totally wrong about him not being as attractive close up. He was a million times hotter, and all she could manage to do was step back and wave him into the house.

'Hello,' he replied, waiting until she'd closed the door and turned around to hold out his hand. 'I'm Harry Bay. And I feel absolutely horrendous about all this.'

Even if he hadn't immediately told her his name, she'd have guessed who he was from his posh British accent – a world away from her broad Midlands one. Realising he'd come to apologise and explain, she took a

deep breath and pasted a smile on her face. She'd be nice to him for now. He was sorry and he was sexy.

Shaking his hand, she replied, 'Sydney Tyler. It's lovely to meet you, Harry. Though I wish it could be under happier circumstances.'

His polite smile turned wry. 'I know, I'm so sorry. Can we sit down?'

She gave a curt nod and they made their way over to the sitting area next to the stairs. She thought about offering him a drink, but figured that what she really wanted was an explanation, and fast. What concerned her the most was that if he hadn't been so damn gorgeous, she'd have been a lot angrier with him.

'So,' she said, determined not to give him any leeway, 'what's going on with the shattering of my peace?'

His lovely grey-blue eyes closed for just a second, and his face took on a pained expression. 'Ms Tyler,' he began, but she cut him off.

'It's Miss Tyler, Mr Bay.'

'I'm sorry, Miss Tyler. Please call me Harry.'

'Sydney.'

He inclined his head, and continued, 'Sydney, I really can't apologise enough. The building work next door was supposed to be finished – or at the very least progressed onto the quieter stuff, like painting and decorating – by now. As I'm sure you know, though, the French are so much more laidback than us. Things have been delayed, and delayed, and now here they are. But, although it's obviously not a very good excuse, I didn't think it would matter.'

'You didn't? Did you think I was deaf, or something?'

'No, of course not. But when people come and stay here, they're generally out all day, visiting surrounding sites of interest. You've noticed there's nothing to do in the village?'

'Yes, I have. But unfortunately, I picked this place for the peace and quiet as I'm working on a novel. The lack of Internet and telephone signal was a blessing, and I was hoping to really get some word count down this week. And then your workmen turned up.'

The longer she'd been speaking, the more horrified Harry's expression became. By the time she was done, his elbows were propped on his knees and his head was in his hands. He scraped his fingers through his hair – making his crazy hairstyle even more insane – and looked back up at her.



‘Christ, Sydney. Oops, sorry, excuse my language. I honestly don’t know what to say. People really do come here and just use it as a base; they visit Chateau-Thierry, Reims, Soissons, Paris, and so on. There are lots of war memorials and burial grounds around here too ...’ He tailed off. ‘But it doesn’t matter; you’re not here for that. It’s just I didn’t think the builders would bother you. I made sure they didn’t start too early or finish too late so that they didn’t disturb you, but I know now I got it totally wrong.’

Sydney softened, and even started to feel a little sorry for him. He really hadn’t done this on purpose, and was clearly mortified by the situation. Something twinkled on his left hand, and an involuntary feeling of annoyance flitted through as she spotted the wedding ring. Of course he was bloody married. Someone as good-looking, as nice, as him had to be married. So now she’d have to quit lusting after him, or at least be more subtle about it. The last thing she wanted was a jealous wife on the warpath.

‘OK, Harry, you can stop apologising now. I can see that it was a genuine mistake, and I’m sure I can get around it. I brought headphones with me, so I should be able to drown out the sound of the builders with some loud music.’

A tiny smile twitched at the corners of Harry’s lips. ‘How are you getting on with the novel? And what’s it about?’

He seemed genuinely interested, so she smiled back and gave an honest response. ‘I haven’t started yet, I’m afraid. I finished my rough outline before I came away, and planned to get a good amount written in this fortnight. And as for what it’s about, you wouldn’t like it. It’s a romance. Or it’s going to be a romance, anyway. More your wife’s kind of thing, I would imagine.’

‘My wife?’ Harry glanced down at his wedding ring, a look of resignation upon his face, which annoyed Sydney no end. Why couldn’t people marry for the right reasons, and stick to the whole till-death-do-us-part oath? Cheating and divorce were getting increasingly rife, and despite his good looks and charm, it seemed that Harry wasn’t the nice guy she’d thought he was. The look on his face when she’d mentioned his wife was unimpressed, unhappy. Well, just because he had problems didn’t mean he should be projecting them onto a practical stranger. It was disrespectful to his wife, and as soon as he’d given that impression, her crush had disappeared like a fire doused with water.

Harry Bay might have had the looks of a male model – albeit a mature one – but he was certainly no angel, and definitely not someone to admire.

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## Chapter Two

The chatter of excitable young voices drew Sydney's attention to the kitchen window. She was stirring some scrambled eggs for breakfast to have on top of a slice of the delicious bread she'd bought from the mobile baker earlier. A glance out into the bright morning revealed Harry in the back garden, talking to one of the builders while two young children – both somewhere between seven and ten, she guessed – ran around the grass, chasing one another. She couldn't hear the conversation, only the rumble of deep voices and the continuing fun of the children.

The conversation between the men concluded, Harry turned and ruffled the hair of the child nearest to him, then turned and headed towards a car parked on the drive of the other half of the building, beckoning the children to follow him. He looked happy, genuinely happy, around them, and Sydney was pleased that he was, at least, very fond of his offspring, even if the same could not be said of his wife.

Then, in a stroke of bad luck, Harry looked up and saw her standing there. His grin widened and he waved at her. Knowing damn well she couldn't pretend she hadn't seen him, she waved back. He pointed at his watch, then held up his outstretched hands three times. Thirty minutes.

Thirty minutes for what?

He offered no further explanation, simply closing the car door after the youngsters had clambered inside, then moved around to the driver's door and got in. Within seconds, the 4x4 was gone, and she was still frozen in place, wondering what on earth he was talking about.

A vicious hiss from the stove reminded her of what she'd been doing, and she hurried back, grasping the wooden spoon and continuing to stir her breakfast before it burned. She thought about what Harry had said – well, gestured – and she could only assume he meant he'd be back in 30 minutes. And the only possible reason she could think of for him telling her that was that he meant to come and see her. In which case, she needed to hurry up and eat, then have a quick shower and get dressed before he arrived. He'd only seen her in her comfortable pyjamas and dressing gown from a

distance, which was just about acceptable, but when he was up close, she wanted to be presentable. It was nothing to do with him being hunky, either. She wouldn't let any strangers see her in this state – never mind a hot man. Even if he was married with two young children.

Thirty-two minutes later, she heard the rumble of an engine, the crunch of gravel, then after a couple more seconds, a knock came at the door. She moved over to let him in, smiling as she gestured him inside. 'Hi, Harry. How are you today? Were those your kids?'

'Morning. I'm good thanks, how about you? And yes, those were my two little monsters. I just took them to my friend's. He's taking them back to England for me, as it seems I'm going to be here longer than expected.' He jerked a thumb in the direction of the other side of the building and rolled his eyes.

She frowned. Where was his wife? Why wasn't she taking them back to England?

'I was just wondering, anyway, if you'd let me make this misunderstanding up to you. Or try to, anyway?'

'Oh, you're going to give me a full refund?' She was only half joking.

Harry raised his eyebrows, then replied, 'Well, I can do, if that's what you want. But what I had in mind was something more ... fun.'

Now it was Sydney's turn to raise her eyebrows. Who the hell was he to propose having fun with a woman who wasn't his wife?

Her expression obviously spoke volumes, because he held up his hands. 'Look, I don't mean funny business, nothing like that. I just meant that, if you wanted to, we could head into Paris for the day. I've offered the builders more money to hurry up, and they'll probably be making an awful lot of noise today. I was hoping I could whisk you away for the day so you're not subjected to it. I just feel so awful that you're here for the quiet, and that I can't provide it ...' He paused. 'Actually, thinking about it, I probably can. OK, as well as heading out, I have another proposition for you. Why don't you use my place to write? It's only at the other end of the village; you can walk or drive there. And because most of the time I'll either be here overseeing the work, or out running various errands, you'll have absolute quiet. My neighbours on both sides are both away at the moment.'

Sydney's mind raced. She liked the idea of visiting Paris, especially as he probably knew the city well and could show her around. She'd never been, and really didn't fancy the idea of going alone. It was just so big, so busy, so intimidating. And he'd said no funny business – he was obviously just being nice. It appeared his wife wasn't around, and now his children had gone back home, he was probably a little lonely. She couldn't imagine the builders were much company. Perhaps she'd misread the signals when he'd looked at his wedding ring – maybe he wasn't discontented with his spouse, maybe he just missed her.

'OK,' she said, before her brain had come to a proper conclusion. 'I'll go into Paris with you. It'll be great – I've never been before. And we can discuss me working at your house.'

'Excellent,' he said, his lips curving in a friendly smile. 'Well, I'll just go and check on the guys next door. Come and find me when you're ready, OK?'

'I will. I won't be too long. I'm already showered, I just need to put some make-up on and grab my bag and some sensible shoes.'

'Oh yes, you'll definitely need sensible shoes. The Métro is great, but there's still a lot of walking to be done in Paris. And some of the best places involve climbing stairs.' He grinned again, then took his leave.

Sydney closed the door behind him, not bothering to lock it again, then went upstairs to get ready for her unexpected day out. She didn't mind starting her novel another day late because the two weeks she'd carved out to get some words down were just a bonus. She'd have managed it had she stayed at home and been at her day job five days a week, but she'd never been on a writing retreat before and thought it could help her write faster, and better, buying her time for an extra revision or two before sending the completed manuscript to her editor. The more polished it was before sending, she'd figured, the less she'd have to do during edits. Ugh, she hated edits, but knew they were a necessary evil.

Opening her wardrobe, she looked at the shoes sitting on its floor. Grabbing the unattractive but comfortable trail shoes, she also picked up a light jacket while she was there, then closed the doors. Moving over to the chest of drawers, she pulled out some thick hiking socks, pulled them on, then put on the shoes, tying them tightly.

Next, she checked her bag contained everything she needed – money, camera, other detritus she always kept in there – and decided it did, with the exception of a drink. She'd make sure to get a bottle of water from the fridge on her way out. Almost set, she took the bag and her jacket downstairs, grabbed the water from the fridge, pulled the keys from the inside of the door, then opened it and stepped outside. Locking up behind her, she stepped across to the other side of the building, looking through the big empty window frames in search of Harry. Damn, she couldn't see him. That meant she'd have to use her minimal French to ask where he was.

Just as she was about to step through the doorway, a voice called her name. It was Harry. He'd wound down the window in his car. 'Sorry,' he said, 'I thought you'd hear the engine running.'

Now he'd mentioned it, of course she could hear it. But she wasn't expecting him to be quite so eager to go that he'd already got in the car and started it up. Shoving aside her confusion, she made her way around to the passenger side and got in, closing the door behind her, then putting on her seatbelt. Only then did she turn to Harry.

'OK,' she said, smiling, 'I'm ready. Whisk away. I take it you know Paris well?'

'Fairly well,' he said, putting the car into gear and accelerating off the drive and onto the deserted village road. 'I know this area better, of course, as I've got my properties here, but I've been into Paris lots of times and done most of the touristy things.'

'Well then, this trip's going to be a little dull if you've done it all before. We don't have to go, you know.'

'You're joking, aren't you? Paris is a fascinating city – I should think it would be impossible to get bored of the place. And I suggested it, anyway. Why would I have done that if I didn't want to go?'

'Because you're trying to make it up to me.'

'True, but I could have suggested a walk around Chateau-Thierry, a visit to a war cemetery, a trip to Reims ... There's much more to do in this part of France than people realise.'

'I know. I deliberately didn't look into any of it, though, as I'm here to work, not to sightsee.'

Harry shot her a pained look. 'You don't have to rub it in. I already told you how bad I feel.'

‘Oh no! I didn’t mean anything by it, I was just saying. Please don’t think any more of it – it was an honest mistake, and I suspect taking my laptop and my notes to your house will solve the problem perfectly anyway.’

He gave a decisive nod. ‘OK. Well, I’ll try and let go of some of my guilt then. Let’s just have a fun day, shall we? You never know, perhaps the city will give you some inspiration for your book. Does it have a setting yet? Is that worked into your outline?’

‘It has. But don’t worry, there’s plenty of room in my head for more inspiration. Maybe it’ll feature in my next novel!’ She grinned. It was sweet how much interest he was paying to her writing. Many people just brushed it off as a silly hobby of hers, something of no consequence. She betted they’d change their minds if she hit the big time and ended up bringing in a ton of money. It was a pipe dream, of course, but she knew people would sit up and take notice if she got rich and famous – so-called friends she hadn’t spoken to for years would crawl out of the woodwork and try to befriend her again, hoping for hand-outs.

She shook her head, eager to uproot the unpleasant ideas. It wouldn’t happen, anyway – the getting rich and famous part. She knew deep down that although her writing was good, it took more than getting a book on retail shelves to make lots of money. For now, she was doing it because she wanted to, not because she planned to make a career out of it. Maybe one day, but not just yet.

They chatted as they travelled into Paris, getting to know one another. Sydney found out all the basics about Harry: where he was from – Cambridge, which explained his posh accent – how old he was, how old his kids were and what their names were, how he’d ended up buying property in Monthiers ... The only thing she couldn’t bring herself to mention was his wife. She really wanted to know where his spouse was, and why she wasn’t here or with her children, but something in her would just not let her ask the question. She knew they couldn’t possibly be separated or divorced, as he still wore his wedding ring. Unless, she thought, it had been his wife’s decision to split up and he still loved her? That could explain his slightly odd behaviour when she’d mentioned her before. In that case, she definitely wouldn’t say anything – she didn’t want to upset him. She would just have to ignore the elephant in the room and hope it didn’t trample all over them.

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## Chapter Three

‘So,’ Sydney said as they emerged from the Métro station, ‘where are we going?’

‘Where do you want to go, beautiful lady? Here, we’re near The Louvre, the Notre-Dame, the flower markets ... Hey, what? What did I say?’

His flirtatious comment had made her turn her face away from his in an attempt to curb her irritation. She couldn’t make her mind up what had happened with his wife, but either way, the fact he still wore his wedding ring meant something, so he should definitely not be flirting with her.

She sucked in a deep breath and decided to let him have it. If he stormed off in a huff, she was resourceful enough to find her way back to Monthiers. Eventually. ‘It’s just ... I don’t appreciate you making those kinds of comments.’ That part wasn’t strictly true. If he was free and single, she’d have been returning the compliments with enthusiasm. ‘You’re married, and it’s not right.’

‘Married?’ There it was again, the confused look, the face that told her he had no idea what she was talking about. After a pause, he glanced down at his left hand. Comprehension finally dawned and he gave a curt nod. ‘OK, Sydney, I think we need to talk. Let’s go and sit down somewhere.’ He took her arm and led her down to the edge of the Seine. As luck would have it, there was an empty bench. They walked over to it and sat down.

Harry twisted his body slightly to face her, then gave a wry smile. ‘Look, I’m sorry you got the wrong impression of me just then. I should probably have realised back in the house when you mentioned my wife ... Sydney, I’m widowed. Shelly, my wife, died four years ago. She had cancer; it was quick ...’ He shifted his gaze from her to his hands, then began to fiddle with the gold band on the third finger of his left hand. He remained silent for several seconds, then pulled in a breath and released it, shakily.

Sydney didn’t know what to say. She looked out across the river, taking in all the beautiful sights and wondering how the two of them could get from this awkward conversation to having a nice time. There was no point turning around and going back to the village – they’d be travelling for a

good couple of hours and the silence would be excruciating. No, much better to clear the air now and hopefully move on.

She reached out and placed her hand on his. ‘Harry, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. Well, obviously I had no idea otherwise we wouldn’t be in this mess. You still wear your wedding ring, and I just got the wrong end of the stick. I never thought for a moment that you might be widowed. I can’t apologise enough.’

He looked up, and twisted his hand, grabbing hers and giving it a squeeze. ‘You’ve got nothing to apologise for, Sydney. It’s not your fault she got cancer, and not your fault you assumed what someone naturally would with the presence of a ring on someone’s wedding finger. It’s me who should be apologising – I should have told you there was no one in the picture before making that remark. Even before inviting you out for the day. Paris is kind of a romantic city, and I can see why I gave you the wrong impression. I’m not a sleazebag, Sydney, I never have been. I was faithful to Shelly from the moment we met until the moment she left us. In fact, I’ve been faithful ever since. There’s been no one else, and I’ve never wanted there to be, really.’

‘Wow,’ Sydney breathed, squeezing his hand. ‘No one else, in four years?’

He shook his head. ‘She was a very special woman.’

Sydney nodded. ‘I can tell from the way you speak about her. She was a very lucky woman, to have a man like you adoring her.’

The smile he gave her was a touch watery, and she had to resist the temptation to reach out and touch his face. He might misconstrue her compassion – she’d lost her mother to that dreadful disease – and think she was making a move. Which would be wildly inappropriate, considering the conversation they were having.

‘Thank you,’ he finally said, dragging his free hand through his hair. He puffed out a breath. ‘OK, at the risk of sounding unfeeling – which I suspect you already know I am not – shall we change the subject to something happier? I brought you here to have a good time, not to hear my sob story. If you want to know more, I’ll tell you, but shall we just have a lovely day in the city first?’

‘Yes,’ she said, decisively. ‘It’s far too beautiful a day to feel sad. So, where are we going?’ She stood up and took a couple of steps closer to the

river, admiring the view once more.

A couple of seconds later, Harry joined her. 'We're not too far from the Notre-Dame, if you'd like to see that? I know the Eiffel Tower is an obvious choice for a Paris first-timer, but we'd be in the queue for ages. If you want to come and see it, pre-booking is the best option.'

'The Notre-Dame would be lovely, thank you. And I totally understand about the Eiffel Tower. I'd much rather spend time exploring than standing in a queue.'

'We can still go and see it later, if you want.'

'Yes, maybe. Let's just see how we get on. Lead the way, kind sir.'

Harry held out his arm. 'M'lady.'

She took his arm with a giggle. 'We sound like 1950s throwbacks.'

Harry shrugged. 'I don't care. I promised you fun, and that's exactly what we're going to have.'

With that, he led her along the bank of the Seine, past the stalls selling second-hand books, paintings and drawings, souvenirs and much more. After passing a large and very beautiful building, which Harry explained was the Palace of Justice – otherwise known as courts of law – their destination came into sight. Sydney gasped. She'd seen photographs of the cathedral, of course, but now she came to the conclusion that they simply did not do the building justice. The towers stretching into the sky, the intricate patterns, the beautiful windows, the commanding presence – the Notre-Dame was truly stunning.

The crowds milling around it clearly agreed with her. People passed by on the square in front of the cathedral, stopping to look and take photos, while others sat on walls soaking up the atmosphere. A fairly small number queued to get in. Sydney and Harry headed over to join the end of the line.

'Wow,' he said, looking around, 'I was expecting a bigger queue. There aren't many tourists around today. Though, I hasten to add, this line moves a damn sight faster than the one for the Eiffel Tower.'

She smiled. 'Good. Do we have to pay to get in?'

'Yes, but I'll get it.'

'No, it's OK. I can pay for myself.'

'I know you can. But I invited you out for the day, so I'm paying.'

'Harry, we're not on a date.'

He turned to look at her, and held her gaze for just a second too long before turning away. He hadn't spoken, but he didn't need to – the way he'd looked at her told her plenty. As far as he was concerned, it seemed, they *were* on a date. A date that had begun with a misunderstanding, had included a conversation about his dead wife and was now leading them into a place of worship. It was officially the strangest date she'd ever been on – even stranger than Richard, the guy who'd kept snakes and spiders and done little else but talk about them. She gave an involuntary shiver.

'Hey,' Harry said, his gaze upon her once more, 'you all right? You cold?' He pulled his arm from hers and went to shrug out of his jacket.

'No,' she said, placing her hand on his arm to stop him, 'I'm not cold. And I have a jacket anyway, thanks. I dunno, I just shivered. One of those weird things, like someone walking across my grave.' She wasn't going to tell him her innermost thoughts – especially about weird blind dates.

He narrowed his eyes at her, as though assessing whether she was telling the truth. She gave him the brightest smile she could summon without hurting her face, then tucked her arm into his once more.

'OK,' he said, reaching into his pocket to retrieve his wallet as they neared the front of the queue, 'but you might need your jacket inside. It could be chilly.'

'I'll definitely grab it if I need it. I'm not a fan of being cold. Hence heading south for a fortnight.'

They shared a glance, one that warmed her both inside and out. The realisation that her crush had come back with a vengeance hit her hard. She'd shied away from it, understandably, when she thought he was spoken for. But now, knowing he was free and single – and seemingly liked her – she allowed the feelings in, examining his back view as he temporarily turned away from her to pay their entrance fee. His dark hair tapered at the top of his neck, which then swept out to wide shoulders. His body nipped in again at the waist. She'd seen him in a T-shirt, so she knew his arms were fairly muscular, and the way his jeans hung on his arse and thighs indicated that his legs would be similar. Maybe she'd get to find out before the fortnight was up.

Harry turned quickly, very nearly catching her in the act of eyeing him up. 'Thank you,' she said.

'What for?'

‘For everything – bringing me here for the day, paying for me ... I appreciate it.’

‘Just part of the service of making it up to you,’ he replied, a glint in his eye indicating that he knew she’d realised it had gone beyond that. For him, anyway. She had no idea if he had an inkling that the attraction was mutual, but she’d make sure he knew soon enough.

They headed into the relative gloom of the cathedral, moving over to one side and pausing for a few seconds to let their eyes adjust to the muted light. When they did, Sydney was instantly impressed. ‘Wow. This place is gorgeous.’

She continued to look around, rapidly coming to the conclusion that she could stand there for days on end and still not fully appreciate the beauty. The inside was even more intricate than the outside; with decoration of some kind everywhere – but so well done that it didn’t look too busy, or tacky. It just looked amazing. When she finally tore her gaze away, Harry was watching her with an amused expression.

‘I can see I got it right, bringing you here. Come on, there’s lots more to see. This place is pretty damn big. Oops, I shouldn’t swear in here, should I?’

She held her hand over her mouth to stifle the laugh that threatened to emerge. ‘It’s OK,’ she said, removing her fingers, ‘I won’t tell.’

‘Thanks. Just for being so kind, I’ll buy you lunch when we’re done here.’

It was a statement, she knew, not a question, so she simply flashed him a grateful smile and continued to explore the beautiful building. They hadn’t been in Paris for more than an hour and a half, and despite the false start, already she was having the most fun she’d ever had on a date – even though, despite Harry’s look earlier, it wasn’t a date.

Or was it?

## Chapter Four

They blinked rapidly as they emerged into the sunlight. Immediately they were swallowed into a crowd, at the front of which was a stern-looking woman holding an umbrella high in the air and speaking rapidly in a language Sydney didn't understand. Harry reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her close.

'Hold on tight. I don't want to lose you. Come on, let's get out of here.'

She nodded and shuffled after him as he got them through the bunch of people unscathed. Once they were clear, she moved up next to him but didn't let go of his hand. He didn't let go either, and they walked together away from the Notre-Dame and off to the left. Sydney was too busy looking around her, at the streets, the architecture, and the people, to take much notice of where they were going, so when they suddenly stopped, she turned to Harry with a frown.

He inclined his head, indicating the building in front of them. She shifted her gaze and gasped.

'Shakespeare and Company! I've definitely heard of this place – it's meant to be one of the best English bookshops in Paris.'

'Well, why don't we go and have a look?'

'Are you sure? Letting me loose in a bookshop is never a good idea.'

'I wouldn't worry. I'm a book lover too. Wait until you see the library at my place in Monthiers. Anyway, in case we lose each other in this warren of bookish goodness, shall we say we'll meet back here in half an hour and go and get something to eat? We can always come back after lunch.'

Sydney glanced at her watch to make a mental note of the time. 'Deal. See you then.'

With that, they headed into the shop, staying fairly close to one another to start with, then gradually drifting apart as the various sections caught their attention. Sydney picked up, flicked through, and replaced several books in turn, enjoying the experience of being in the famous shop as much as she was the contents themselves. She moved on, and spotted the stairs heading to the next level. The entire shop was endearingly higgledy piggledy and

the staircase was no exception. Fortunately, the climb was worth it. Another, albeit smaller, level awaited her and she enjoyed perusing weighty tomes and more manageably-sized paperbacks until something made her check the time. Damn – her half an hour was up. She could scarcely believe it had gone by so quickly, but at least it meant it was time to go and get something to eat and spend some more time with Harry.

The thought of him hurried her on, and she moved through the shop as fast as she could without looking like a shoplifter, emerged into the daylight. Harry stood with his back to her, looking out at the side view of the Notre-Dame. She couldn't resist – she crept up behind him and grabbed his waist, digging her fingers in and tickling him.

He swore loudly, then turned and grabbed her, only releasing his hold when he realised it was her. 'Sydney, you crazy woman. I thought you were a pickpocket.' His face softened, and he gave her a playful jab with the end of his finger. 'You're lucky I didn't rugby-tackle you to the ground.'

'I wouldn't have thought a self-respecting pickpocket would have announced their presence by tickling you. You knew damn well it was me.'

'After a second I did. My first instinct was to put up a fight.'

'Then you grabbed me anyway.'

'Can you blame me?' He winked at her, then held out his arm. 'Come on, we'll head into the Latin Quarter for lunch, if that's all right with you. Did you enjoy it in there?'

She mock-sighed. 'You're a very bad man. Yes, the Latin Quarter is fine. And yes, I definitely enjoyed it in there. I could have stayed there for hours.'

He began to walk away from the bookshop, with the Notre-Dame on their right. 'Me too. It's just as well we had a time limit, huh? Plus I didn't fancy carrying a load of books around. Though I think you can buy stuff and have them ship it to you, which saves a load of hassle.'

'I can imagine it does.'

They fell into a companionable silence as they made their way deeper into the Paris streets, before eventually moving into a very narrow street lined with shops and restaurants. Harry stopped outside an establishment which had very bright signage, proclaiming it to be a French restaurant.

'Wouldn't you think they'd just call it a restaurant, since we're in France?'

Harry laughed. 'I never thought of it like that. You OK with eating here? They've got a pretty good variety, and it's delicious too. I come here quite often.'

'No problem. I'm not fussy.'

Harry raised his eyebrows, and she quickly added, 'About what I eat.'

He grinned and led her into the restaurant, greeting two of the staff with familiarity. Sydney trailed behind, smiling shyly at the people he'd spoken to and murmuring a barely audible "Bonjour".

'Where do you want to sit?' Harry asked, turning to her.

'I don't mind. Here is fine.' She indicated the table they stood next to.

Harry gave a nod then moved around to pull out a chair, gesturing her into it. She thanked him and sat down. He helped her push the chair under the table, and only then did he go and sit down opposite her. A waiter came over and put down a carafe of water and two glasses, leaving them with a menu each and saying something before he left.

'What did he say?' Sydney asked. 'My French is very basic.'

Harry looked up. 'He just said he'd be back in a few minutes to take our orders.'

'Oh, fair enough. Can you recommend anything in particular?'

'That's a tough one. I like pretty much everything on this menu. What do you like? Meat? Pasta? Salad?' His gaze flicked over the menu, and Sydney found herself staring at him once more, the harsh lighting showing that his hair wasn't quite as dark as she'd previously thought. At his temples were the lightest touches of grey beginning to show, and she suspected that in a few years he'd be sporting a very fetching salt-and-pepper look, much like George Clooney.

It was only when he looked up and met her gaze that she realised she hadn't answered his question. She cleared her throat hastily, and replied, 'I like them all, but definitely prefer meat to salad.'

'OK,' Harry replied decisively, seemingly unaware of, or unaffected by, her pause. 'Then you'll like the Boeuf Bourguignon. Shall I order that for you?'

She nodded, happy to let him take over, rather than her stumbling over pronunciation and having to resort to pointing at items on the menu.

After a few minutes, the waiter left with their order and returned with the wine Harry had requested.



‘I can only have one glass,’ he said, pouring hers first, ‘because I’ll be driving us back home, but they’re pretty relaxed here. What we don’t finish, they’ll let us take away with us.’

‘Really?’ she said, taking the glass he handed to her. ‘Thank you. That’s excellent – it seems the restaurants are as laidback as the builders in this country.’

Harry nodded emphatically. ‘Yes. In a restaurant, it’s a good thing. In builders, not so much. I’ll be honest, the whole renovation of the barn has been a pain in the arse and I’ll be glad when it’s over and done with. Especially since I can start making the money back that I’ve spent.’

‘Well, it’s definitely been worth your money and agony. My half of the building is very comfortable, pretty and spacious. I’d definitely use it again – as long as you can promise there will be no more workmen.’ She winked to show she was teasing – a little.

‘If it means you’ll come back, I can definitely promise no workmen. Even if it means leaving it unfinished. Or you could just come and stay with me – for free.’

‘W-with you? Do you have a spare room?’

‘Yes. The place is pretty big – even when the children are with me. But I didn’t mean in the spare room.’

Her eyebrows almost disappeared into her hairline. Was he really saying what she thought he was saying?

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘you’re not really surprised, are you? Now you know I’m not attached, surely you realise I’ve been flirting with you because I like you, not because I’m some kind of two-timing scumbag?’

‘Um ... have you been flirting?’

‘You know damn well I have! Come on, Sydney, don’t be all coy. At least put me out of my misery and let me know if the feeling is mutual.’

Sydney remained silent for a few seconds, her mind reeling. Once she was alone, she’d been planning to spend some time figuring out how to tell Harry she liked him. But that idea had been for the future, maybe for that evening when she went to bed. And now it seemed that he was saving her a job, and for some reason she couldn’t answer him. Mentally berating herself, she picked up her glass of wine and downed a couple of mouthfuls. Placing it down again, she sucked in a breath.

‘Yes, Harry, the feeling is mutual. Very much so.’ She didn’t say anything else, mainly because she didn’t know *what* to say.

‘Well.’ He paused, taking a sip of his own drink. ‘That’s good. Excellent. I’m sorry I was a little direct, but as you’ve probably realised, I’m extremely out of practice when it comes to flirting with women. Since Shelly passed, I’ve never even wanted to. Until you came along, that is. It’s crazy, I know, since we barely know each other. But I’d like to get to know you better, see if there’s something between us. I probably didn’t say it very well, but you get my meaning, right?’

‘Yes.’ She grinned. ‘I understand you perfectly, Harry. Now I know you’re not attached, I’d like to get to know you better too. I think we’re doing a pretty good job already, don’t you? I think I’ve talked more to you in the past few hours than I have to anyone for ... I don’t want to think how long.’

‘Why is that, Sydney? You can’t have been single for long, surely? I’m ashamed of the rest of the British male population if no one’s asked you out on a date.’

She shrugged. ‘You don’t need to be ashamed. I have been asked out – probably a couple of months ago now, but since my last relationship I just haven’t felt that, you know, spark with anyone. The guys who have tried to chat me up have been nice enough, but I haven’t felt anything beyond platonic. It hasn’t bothered me too much, really. I’d rather have no relationship at all than one I feel “meh” about.’

‘I couldn’t agree more. Though if you don’t mind me asking, what happened in your last relationship?’

## Chapter Five

Sydney's heart sunk right into her shoes. Damn, she should have known that question was coming, prepared for it somehow. Unfortunately, though, she hadn't seen it coming and therefore sat there, opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, unable to form the words and make them leave her lips. Eventually, she let out a heavy sigh, then drained the rest of her wine.

'I think you'd better fill me up,' she said, holding her glass out to Harry. 'We appear to have got to the sticky part of us getting to know each other.'

'God, I'm sorry,' he replied, quickly taking her glass, filling it up, and handing it back. 'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I just thought it was a pretty natural question to follow what you said.'

She took a long, slow sip of her wine to buy her a few seconds to formulate a response. 'No, it's OK. It was a natural question, and one you've got every right to ask. I should have expected it, but it's just that everything seems to be moving so fast. One minute I think you're married and I'm trying to be friendly but on a purely platonic basis, and the next I learn that not only are you single, but you like me as much as I like you. My head's spinning a little, if I'm honest.'

Harry nodded slowly, and sipped his own wine. It seemed despite the awkwardness of their conversation, he was sticking to his guns and only having one glass and therefore was trying to make it last. 'I know what you mean, and I'm really sorry if things have moved at warp speed. It's just that I had a head start, if you get what I mean, because obviously all along I knew I was single, and that I liked you. For me there was no barrier, no reason to be at arm's length. Also, Shelly dying so young has made me appreciate life more, and really hit home for me that life is short and we should grasp every moment of fun and happiness we possibly can.'

'I couldn't agree more. Though I hasten to add that I have been happy and having fun without a man.'

'I don't doubt it. I've been happy single too, though of course I still miss Shelly every day. That's not why I haven't been with anyone, though. In fact, when she knew the end was near, she forced me to promise to find

someone else, not to be alone. It's just that, until now, there hasn't been anyone I wanted to fulfil that promise with.'

God, she really had to answer his question now, didn't she? Harry had already spilled a great deal of personal information and emotional stuff. The least she could do was tell him a little bit about her last relationship. Plus, they'd agreed not to talk about depressing topics today, so although that plan had clearly gone out of the window, maybe the sooner they got the baggage out of the way, the sooner they could continue having fun.

'She sounds like a wonderful woman. Unfortunately, my ex wasn't wonderful at all. We were together for just over a year and everything was great ...' Sydney could see the growing confusion on Harry's face as she spoke. 'That was, until I found out he was married. As in, not even separated. Still living with his wife, as man and wife, and as far as she was concerned, they were happily married. Neither of us had the slightest inkling about the other. Needless to say, I ditched him as soon as I found out. I felt as though my heart had been ripped from my chest and fed into an industrial shredder. I've never felt so betrayed and lied to in all my life.'

Harry's expression went through a series of changes. Shocked, angry, disbelieving, and finally sympathetic. 'Christ, what a wanker. Sorry, Sydney, I apologise for my language, but really that was quite mild compared to the words I'm saying in my head.'

'No need to apologise. I'm sure I've already called him all the words in your head, and then some. Plus I don't mind swearing, anyway. You go for it.'

He reached across the table and took her hand. 'Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me all that. Now I totally understand why seeing my wedding ring made you back off. In fact –' he reached down and grasped the band encircling his finger '– I'm going to take it off. I mean no disrespect to Shelly, but I'm doing my best to follow her wishes, and if this helps, then I know she won't mind.'

'You don't have to do that,' Sydney replied. She didn't know why she'd believed Harry from the beginning, when he'd said he was widowed, but for some reason she did. Despite what *he* had done to her – and his poor wife – she trusted Harry. Possibly because he'd already invited her into his home – albeit his holiday home. Her ex had never done that, and it had taken her 13 damn months to find out why.

Harry's words pulled her from her reverie. 'I know I don't. But knowing what I know now, I don't want to give you reason to doubt me. I'm kind of stuck over here until the renovation of the other half of the barn is done, but when it's finished and I come home, I would love for you to meet my kids. Providing things are going well between us, that is. I don't want to confuse them by bringing a woman into their lives if we're not serious.'

'I understand,' she replied. 'And I guess we should see how things go. I mean, we haven't even kissed yet. You might be a lousy kisser!' The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them, but she suspected her subconscious had conjured them up, fed up of the dismal conversation and wanting to lighten things up.

Harry laughed long and loud, startling a couple of the other diners, and drawing amused glances from the staff. Just then, the swinging doors from the kitchen opened and a waiter came out, carrying a few plates and heading in their direction.

Harry leant over the table a little and lowered his voice. 'Just so you know, this conversation isn't over. You're going to pay for that comment. Not to mention I'm going to prove it's not true.'

His words and the look in his eyes sent a delicious shiver through her. She was happy for the distraction from the unpleasant part of the conversation they'd just had, and clung onto it, hard. If anything meaningful was going to happen between them, then they both had to let go of the past and move on together. She was sure it wouldn't be easy, especially as there were children involved, but they'd never know unless they tried.

She managed to give him a cheeky wink just before the waiter arrived at their table, then she turned her attention to the man, giving a polite smile and murmuring words of thanks as her meal was placed before her. It looked delicious, but she had no idea where she was going to put it all. The serving was huge. She continued to stare at her plate, hardly noticing their server had gone.

'I hope you're hungry,' Harry said, pulling her attention back to him.

She grinned. 'I am, but I don't think my appetite will stretch quite this far.'

He shrugged. 'Just eat what you can. No sense in making yourself feel sick. Just enjoy it.'

‘I intend to.’

They shared a smile, their gazes lingering a while, before they picked up their cutlery and began to eat. They were silent for some time, except for the sounds of knives and forks scraping on plates, and the occasional pleasure-filled noise as the delicious food exploded over their taste buds.

Sydney managed to eat about two-thirds of her plateful before admitting defeat. She put her cutlery down and picked up her napkin, surreptitiously checking out Harry as she dabbed delicately at her mouth. He was still demolishing his lunch and looking thoroughly happy to be doing so. It was nice to be able to study him fairly close up without him realising.

He really was worth looking at. His thick, slightly too-long hair; his eyes, an unusual blue-grey mix that twinkled with mischief; the laughter lines that surrounded them. She was suddenly very glad he had those laughter lines. Not only did they add to his charm, but she was pleased that even though he’d had a hard time of it, things weren’t all bad. He’d had enough smiles in his life to create those lines, and she really hoped that, together, they’d have even more.

‘More wine?’ she said, realising he’d finally finished his. Her second glass was still half full.

‘No, thanks,’ he said, holding his hand over the rim of his glass. ‘I don’t want to risk drink-driving. The French roads are dangerous enough when you’re sober. I’d love some water, though, if you don’t mind pouring it for me.’

‘Of course not,’ she replied, reaching for the carafe. ‘You carry on eating. I’m done, I’m afraid. That huge dish of deliciousness has defeated me.’

‘Nice alliteration.’

‘What can I say? I’ve got a way with words.’

‘Thanks,’ he said as she slid the glass of water towards him, picking it up and taking a gulp. Her gaze was drawn to his Adam’s apple as it bobbed up and down, and she was in danger of falling into a smutty daydream about him when he dragged her attention back to the present.

‘So, what do you want to do when we’re finished here?’ he asked.

I’d really like to go back to your place and get naked and horizontal was her first thought. She bit her lip to avoid the smirk that threatened to emerge, and tried to turn the gesture into looking like she was thinking. A few seconds later, she spoke, ‘I really don’t know. There’s just so much to

do in Paris, and because I've never been before, I just don't know where to start. What would you advise? You totally hit the nail on the head with the Notre-Dame and Shakespeare and Company. I loved them both.'

Harry put his cutlery down and swiped at his lips with a napkin. Then he reached for his water once more and drained the glass, letting out a satisfied sigh when he was done. 'Hmm, you're right. There really is lots to do. OK, indoors or outdoors?'

'Umm, I guess it depends if it's still sunny outside. If it is, I vote for outdoors.'

'Good choice.' He gestured to the member of staff behind the bar for the bill. The Frenchman gave a nod of understanding, then busied himself with some pieces of paper stuck on a spike, before eventually bringing a small leather folder over and placing it next to Harry.

'*Merci*,' Harry said. Directing his words at Sydney, he asked, 'Do you want to take that bottle of wine? Maybe we can share the rest of it together at some point when I'm not driving.'

'Yes, if you like. Though it'll be a nuisance to carry.'

'I'm sure they'll give us a plastic bag or something.'

'In that case, OK. But you're carrying it.'

He chuckled. 'No problem. But you might want to finish what you've got. I'm not pouring it back into the bottle!'

She narrowed her eyes at him and picked up her glass. 'Are you trying to get me drunk?'

'Absolutely not. I don't want to have to carry an inebriated woman on the Métro. Why, you're not a lightweight, are you?'

'Fortunately for you, no.' She sipped at the remainder of the golden liquid as Harry pulled Euros out of his wallet and placed them inside the leather folder. Instead of waiting for it to be collected, he stood and took it over to the bar. Sydney watched as they exchanged words – they weren't audible across the room – and then the man produced a carrier bag from underneath the counter and passed it to Harry. Nods and smiles were given, then Harry returned to their table, triumphant.

'Here we go, now we can enjoy the rest of it at our leisure. I'm pleased, as it's bloody good wine.'

'Agreed.'

'OK, ready to go?'

She took a sip of her water, checked she had all her possessions with her, then moved to stand. Harry was beside her in the blink of an eye, helping her out of the chair. ‘Thank you,’ she said, flashing him a smile.

‘You’re welcome. Come on then, let’s go and see what the weather is doing. It’s just as changeable in Northern France as it is in Britain, so for all we know it could be snowing right now.’

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# Chapter Six

Fortunately, it wasn't snowing. The sun was out and shining brightly onto the Paris streets, and they made their way to the nearest Métro station. A couple of changes later, and they emerged from Concorde station and out into a massively busy area with roads that looked more like car parks, where cars, bikes – both motorised and with pedals – and Segways zipped around.

'Christ,' Sydney said, taking in the crazy scene. 'Where exactly are we going, and how are we going to get there alive?'

'We're going to walk through the Tuileries Gardens down to The Louvre, if that's OK? Maybe grab an ice cream and soak up some sun on the way down? And as for getting there, we're going to use the crossings, and still run like hell.'

'Oh, OK.' She glanced down at her feet. 'Thankfully I can run in these, because I don't want to be road kill.'

He took her hand and squeezed it. 'I wouldn't let that happen to you. OK, come on, let's go. I promise it'll be worth it.'

They moved over to the nearest zebra crossing, and stood, hand in hand, at the edge of the pavement. Sydney soon realised just how insane it all was – some drivers stopped at the crossings, some didn't, some went so fast that it appeared they weren't going to stop, then braked at the last minute ...

'Fuck,' she said, 'are you sure we're not going to end up as road kill?'

'No, it'll be fine. Just wait until there are a few more people waiting to cross, then hopefully the drivers will stop.'

'OK,' she said, though it was obvious she was going to do whatever he said. She didn't want to be wandering alone in Paris – she had no idea where she was going, for starters. Plus it was much more fun exploring with someone else – particularly if they knew what they were talking about, and where to go.

'Ready?' he said, tightening his grip on her hand and leaning forward.

'Yes, I think so.'

‘OK, go!’ With that, they scurried across half the road, then did the same again at the next crossing. A few minutes later they were free of the concrete jungle and heading into the Tuileries.

‘Wow,’ Sydney said, as they stood on the centre path that led further into the gardens. ‘This is gorgeous. And what’s that?’ She pointed at a huge stone arch right at the other end of the path.

‘Hang on, hang on. I’ll tell you what I know – which, I warn you, isn’t a great deal – as we go along.’

It was only when he squeezed her fingers she realised they were still holding hands. She, for one, couldn’t see any reason to stop either. ‘OK. You’re in charge, then.’

He cocked an eyebrow at her, and they started walking. There was so much to see – bars and cafés, statues, beautiful plants, and of course, lots of people. The place had a very laidback vibe; the men, women, and children they passed didn’t seem to be in a rush to get anywhere, and indeed, many had blankets or deckchairs and simply laid or sat soaking up the sun. Sydney decided it wasn’t a bad idea. She tipped her head back, enjoying the warming sensation on her skin. She’d always been a fan of that great big ball of fire in the sky, and had hoped to squeeze in some sunbathing or, at the very least, reading in the garden while she was away. She wondered if Harry had a decent garden at his place, because she certainly wasn’t going to get any peace and quiet at the barn.

‘Hey,’ Harry said gently, ‘want to stop and sit down for a bit?’

She looked back down and turned to him with a smile. ‘Yes, sounds good. I’m enjoying this sunshine.’

‘OK. We’ll see if there are any seats available at the pond.’

She didn’t know what he meant, but didn’t ask either. She figured she’d find out soon enough.

After a few minutes, as she’d expected, she discovered exactly what Harry had been talking about. For there, in front of them, was a large raised pond, surrounded by deckchairs. A pretty fountain sat in the middle, spurting water into the air. As it was such a beautiful day, predictably, many of the deckchairs were taken. But Lady Luck must have been shining down on them because a couple packed their bags up and left, and Sydney and Harry took their places immediately.

‘Phew,’ he said as he sunk into the seat, putting the carrier bag carefully on the ground, ‘that was lucky.’

‘It was. Anyone would think you had used the force to get them to move.’

Harry waggled his eyebrows. ‘Perhaps I did. You’ll never know. And if you try and tell anyone, I’ll use the force to stop you.’

She gave him a playful swipe on his arm, and he stuck his tongue out. Then, their silliness temporarily over, they sat back in their chairs and watched the world go by. The sun continued to beam down on them, people continued to feed the ducks and the pigeons in and around the pond, and the din of the surrounding city was muted, somehow, making it easy to forget it was there. Easy to think she was sitting beside a pond on a grand estate, right out in the countryside, at the end of a long drive and far away from everything.

Sighing contentedly, she shifted her bottom forward so she lay slightly flatter in the chair, clutching her bag to her stomach – Harry’s earlier comment about pickpockets had not gone unnoticed. Which is why she jumped so forcefully when a hand grasped hers. She jerked upright, squealed, her heart pounding painfully beneath her ribs. Even as all the reactions crashed through her, her brain realised just who had taken her hand, and it certainly wasn’t unwelcome.

Harry looked at her, an amused expression on his face. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you jump, but who the hell did you think it was?’

She pulled in a shaky breath. ‘It’s your bloody fault. All your talk of pickpockets has made me paranoid!’

‘All my talk? I mentioned it in passing, as a joke. And anyway, nobody would be able to pickpocket you with me sitting right here. They wouldn’t dare.’ He sat up straight and squared his shoulders. ‘See? I’m terrifying, me.’

‘Yes, I’m positively quaking in my boots,’ Sydney replied dryly. ‘But thanks anyway, I feel much better knowing you’re looking out for me.’

‘I’m doing more than that,’ he said quickly.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. I’m wishing I could kiss you.’

‘Oh ...’

‘Can I?’

‘Now? Here?’

‘Why not? It’s pretty romantic.’

‘But people will see.’

‘No one will care. This is Paris – they’re all smutty and sex mad.’

‘Really? In that case, that would be lovely.’ She twisted her upper body to face him, leaning to meet him halfway. She kept her eyes open a little while, wanting to see his expression, but he quickly got so close he grew blurry, so she squeezed her lids shut. Opening her mouth slightly, a thrill ran through her as she felt his breath against her lips, then finally his mouth on hers. It was tentative at first – she remembered he was as out of practice as she was; even more so, in fact – then he grew more comfortable, more confident. His gentle movements grew more passionate, his lips taking hers as though he wanted nothing more in the world than to be kissing her. She certainly hoped that was the case, as it was the way she felt.

Eventually, the relatively chaste kisses were not enough. Harry slipped his hand around the back of her neck, pulled her harder onto him, and plunged his tongue between her lips. She had to work hard not to let a moan escape – she was sure the people around them were getting enough of a show without her making noises like she was in a porno. Instead, she shifted her own hand to mirror his, tangling her fingers into the thick hair at the nape of his neck and tugging it slightly.

He reacted by kissing her harder, his tongue slipping sensuously against hers, doing a little dance and exploring every sensitive millimetre of her mouth and lips. She was in serious danger of melting into a puddle of lust and being soaked up into the Parisian soil beneath them. Determined to hold her own, she kissed with as much fervour as he, forcing his tongue back into his mouth with hers and returning the favour.

Soon, she grew horribly aware that if they continued, they’d be likely to get carried away and end up being arrested for indecent exposure. Certainly, if they were in a private dwelling, she’d be itching to shove his jacket down his arms, then curl her fingers under the hem of his T-shirt and tug it off over his head. She was eager to get a better view of the slice of stomach and the dark hair that bisected it than the fairly distant peek she’d got from the barn conversion’s window the day before.

God, had it really only been a day since she’d met Harry? A day since her plans to write most of her planned novel had been blown to smithereens

by the arrival of a bunch of noisy French builders? A day since he'd come into her retreat and apologised profusely, and made her uncomfortable with her attraction to him since he was married?

The swirling thoughts gave her serious pause, and she moved her hand to Harry's shoulder and gently pushed him away.

'W-what's the matter?' His pupils were dilated, grown large with lust, and his lips were swollen, showing serious signs of the kissing they'd just given and received.

'N-nothing, it's just ...' She tailed off and looked around, convinced they'd have a crowd standing around them, taking photographs and recordings on their mobile phones and broadcasting them to all the social networks. 'I think things are probably going a little fast. We only met yesterday!'

A tiny line appeared between Harry's eyebrows. 'We were only kissing. There's no law against it, is there?'

'There was more intent behind what we were just doing, and you know it.'

He flopped back into the deckchair and ran his fingers through his hair, returning it to the crazy state it had been in when she'd first laid eyes on him the previous day. 'You're right.' He offered her a sheepish grin. 'What can I say? It's been a while, and I fell upon you like a starving man at an all-you-can-eat buffet. But I'm not going to apologise. Maybe we are going too fast, but for some reason my heart and body lead my head when it comes to you, and I can't help it. And honestly, I don't think it's a bad thing. We've both had a rough time of it, and we deserve some happiness, don't you think?'

## Chapter Seven

Sydney woke up feeling as far away from bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as it was possible to be. After the impromptu snog in the Tuileries Gardens yesterday, they'd grabbed an ice cream – which hadn't done much to cool her down – and headed to look at the pyramid at The Louvre, which had been made even more famous than it already was by Dan Brown's best-selling book and the resulting film. After that, they'd wandered back down to the river and walked alongside it, hand in hand, before heading back to the car, and finally, back to Monthiers.

Once they'd arrived at the barn, Sydney had told Harry she'd rather he didn't accompany her inside, just in case they got carried away again, adding that they should both sleep – separately – on what had happened between them and see how they felt in the morning. Harry had departed reluctantly after a brief kiss on the lips, leaving her to crawl into bed, tossing and turning and wishing she'd not been so cautious and had just let him come in with her.

A knock at the door elicited a snarl from her parched throat, until her sleepy brain kicked in, and she realised that the only person it could be was Harry. The builders didn't start quite this early, and besides, they had no reason to disturb her.

Panic hit her like a tidal wave, and she froze. Her natural instinct, of course, was to go and answer the door, but the fact that she'd literally just woken up and probably looked a fright was preventing her from moving. Maybe he'd think she was still asleep and go away.

He rapped again. 'Sydney, it's me!' Then, pointlessly, 'It's Harry.'

Forcing her limbs to move, she rolled out of bed and over to the window. Opening it a little, she replied, 'Just a minute. You woke me up.' She closed it again before giving him chance to reply, then went into the bathroom, splashed cold water on her face, scraped hasty fingers through the birds' nest that was her hair and decided that would have to do. Perhaps her terrifying state would scare him off and mean she could avoid having a difficult conversation at such an early hour.

Grabbing her robe from the hook on the bedroom door, she slipped into it, tied the belt tightly around her waist, and left the room. As she got halfway down the stairs, she could see Harry through the pane of glass at the top of the door. He looked as though he'd had a sleepless night too. She didn't know whether to be relieved or disturbed by this information.

Sucking in a breath in an attempt to steady her nerves and push some oxygen to her brain, hopefully kick-starting it, she opened the door.

'Morning,' she said, standing back to let him in.

'Morning,' he replied, regarding her with a sheepish expression. 'Sorry. I slept really badly, then woke up at half six and couldn't get back to sleep, so I thought I'd come over and deprive you of sleep too.' His grin told her he was only half-joking. 'Anyway, these are for you.'

She took the proffered flowers and box of chocolates with a frown. 'What are these for?'

'Well,' he said, heading into the kitchen, filling the kettle and switching it on, 'I did what we agreed. I slept on it. As I said, I slept really badly, but you get the gist. And this morning I still think we should go for it – more than ever, actually. Yes, we've both got baggage, and at home there's a bit of distance between us, but that's even more reason to give it a go. If things don't work out, at least we won't bump into each other in the street! And as for bringing flowers and chocolate, well, I didn't know which you'd prefer, so I decided to hedge my bets. I'm determined to impress.'

The mischief in his eyes and the smile threatening to take over his lips were infectious. Sydney couldn't help it – she laughed. And once she started, she couldn't stop. When she eventually calmed down enough to take a breath, she put the gifts he'd brought her on the worktop and stepped over to where he stood by the boiling kettle. She slipped her arms around his waist, and he quickly reciprocated.

Harry leant down for a kiss, then paused, seemingly thinking better of it. 'Does that mean you're going to give us a chance?'

Standing on her tiptoes, Sydney pressed a kiss to his lips. 'What do you think?'

'I'm going to take that as a yes.' With that, he captured her mouth with his, and they quickly became lost in one another, this time with no reason to stop.

Sydney felt much better about their kiss this time. Firstly, she too had spent time during the night thinking about their potential relationship. She'd eventually come to the conclusion that it was pointless trying to guess what would happen. The only way to find out if things would work out between them was to try. She couldn't punish him – and herself – for her ex's deceit. If she never trusted another man again, then she'd never be happy. And she deserved happiness – everyone did.

She pulled away, feeling pleasantly dizzy and sucking in a much-needed deep breath. Harry took her hands and pressed kisses to her knuckles, and it was then she realised he'd removed his wedding ring, leaving a band of pale skin in its wake.

'You've taken it off,' she said, though it was stating the obvious.

'Yes, I have. It felt like the right thing to do. I'll always love and miss Shelly, but she's gone and there's bugga all I can do about it. And I figured that as I'm asking you to give me a go, to let go of your past and trust me, the least I can do is let go of my past too. I have no doubt in my mind that it won't be plain sailing, but I genuinely think it will be worth it.'

He was so wide-eyed, so earnest, and his words so meaningful that she didn't know how to respond. So she let her body do the talking instead. Walking backwards and pulling him along with her, she perched on the edge of the kitchen table and wrapped her arms and legs around him, guiding his head down for another kiss. She gave it her everything, doing her best to tell him with actions what she couldn't seem to put into words. That she thought it would be worth it too. That she'd let go of her past and make a fresh start with him, and do her very best to make him happy.

The passion that had threatened to overwhelm them the previous day did just that, and the kitchen filled with moans, groans, and grunts, punctuated by the occasional expletive. They held onto one another for dear life, and Sydney could not stop herself from grinding against the erection that was pressed between her thighs, which quickly grew harder as she writhed.

Twisting his face away and gasping into her ear, Harry said, 'Fucking hell, Sydney. Carry on doing that and I won't be able to stop myself from pulling off those cute pyjamas and doing very rude things to you.'

Her response was another jerk of her hips.

Harry growled. 'I'm not joking.'



She moved her arms from around his neck and shifted them until she could cup his buttocks in her hands. ‘Neither was I.’ She pulled him harder onto her, so hard she was in danger of getting bruised. ‘Harry Bay, I would very much like you to do rude things to me.’

‘Very rude things, I said.’

‘So be it.’

‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ she said quietly, then turned his face back to hers and kissed him.

Their lips and tongues battled, parting only when between them they yanked off Sydney’s robe and pyjama top and Harry’s polo shirt. The rest of the time, they busily unzipped and unbuttoned until they were both naked, their heated skin moulded together.

Sydney reached to grab his cock.

‘Sydney,’ he gasped, taking hold of her wrist. ‘Wait ... let me look at you.’ He stepped back, his naked form totally glorious and yet utterly out of place in a kitchen. ‘Wow, you’re beautiful.’

As his gaze raked her body, she did the same to him, studying him from the top of his greying head to the tips of his toes. She very much liked what was in between. His shoulders were broad, well-defined, his torso not overly muscular, but toned. He had legs somewhere between a football player and a rugby player – thick and strong, but not too big for his frame. And as for his cock ... Well, it had been long enough that anything would have done, but she certainly wouldn’t be “making do” with Harry’s cock.

It was just right, as a certain fairy tale character would have said. Not small, not by a long shot, but not so large that it would be uncomfortable. More importantly, given his superb kissing technique, she suspected he knew what to do with it.

Finally, she shifted her gaze back up to his face and was then caught like a rabbit in headlights. His eyes were hooded, the look he shot at her intense and laden with intent. He appeared predatory, hungry, and she had no wish to deny him any longer.

‘Come here,’ she said, with a grin and a crook of her finger. ‘I’m done looking. Now I want to touch.’

He smirked back and closed the space between them in a couple of large strides. His stiff cock pressed against her as he took her into his arms,

leaning down to draw her bottom lip into his mouth.

She writhed against him as he sucked at the delicate flesh, the delicious sensations he elicited zipping around her body at light speed. 'Mmm ...' She slipped her hand down past her stomach and took hold of his shaft. This time he didn't stop her. He was too busy turning her in a mass of supercharged hormones. She decided to return the favour.

Shifting her fingers lower, she encircled his cock and began to stroke him slowly but firmly. Now it was Harry's turn to moan.

'Unf,' he groaned, 'that's good. So fucking good. But if you carry on, I'm not going to last long. And it was already going to be quick!'

'That's all right,' she replied, picking up her pace. 'Kitchen tables aren't exactly designed for long-winded lovemaking, are they?'

'That's true.' Then he flicked his gaze down to the wooden surface beneath her bottom, looking concerned. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.' She gave his dick a squeeze, pulling a strangled moan from his throat. 'But I'll be even better when you fuck me.'

'I'd like nothing more.' He reached down and pushed her thighs apart, then paused. 'Oh fuck. I don't have any condoms. Do you?'

The crestfallen expression on his face would have made her laugh if the atmosphere hadn't been so charged, so serious. 'I don't, but it doesn't matter. I presume that you're clean?'

He nodded.

'Good. And I've been tested since, you know, and I'm OK too. And we don't have to worry about babies.'

'We don't?'

'No. I'm covered.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'In that case, shall we stop talking?'

She laughed and pressed a kiss to the nearest part of his body she could reach, which happened to be his forehead. 'Yes, I think that's a bloody good idea.'

With that, she hooked her legs around his buttocks and pulled him closer. Harry quickly slipped his hand down and grasped his shaft, aiming it at her entrance. Their fooling around had rendered her slick so he sunk home with minimal resistance, her walls parting eagerly to allow him inside. Their groans and expletives filled the room, and when his balls rested against her, he paused for a few seconds, allowing them both to enjoy the moment.

‘Christ,’ he forced out, leaning his forehead against hers. ‘I feel like a horny teenager, or a born-again virgin. I thought I was going to come right there and then!’

‘I’m sure you can hold on a little longer than that, can’t you? And if not, you’d better hope you can get hard again soon afterwards, because you’re not leaving this room until I’ve had an orgasm. Preferably around your cock.’

‘Such dirty words from such an angelic mouth.’ He pressed a kiss to said mouth. ‘Carry on like that and I’ll definitely come.’

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## Chapter Eight

Groaning, Sydney and Harry disentangled their limbs.

‘Fucking hell,’ he said. ‘That was ...’

‘Amazing? Fantastic? Explosive?’

‘Wow, you’re modest, aren’t you?’

She stuck her tongue out at him. ‘Just saying how it is. Or was. Come on, let’s go upstairs.’ Sliding off the table, she took his hand.

‘Again?’ he said, looking down at his limp cock.

‘Yes,’ she replied, decisively. ‘Again.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

They made their way upstairs and into Sydney’s bedroom. Crossing the room, they clambered onto the bed and moved straight into one another’s arms once more. Their mouths mashed together, lips parting, tongues exploring, hormones racing.

Sydney reached down and grasped Harry’s buttocks, digging her fingers into the firm flesh and pulling him even tighter to her, grinding her crotch against his.

He made an indecipherable sound into her mouth, and she was gratified to note that his cock had already started to swell once more. She forced a hand between their heated torsos and helped him along, busily stimulating his shaft until it was ready to go again. Then she pulled away from his kiss, pushed him onto his back, and began crawling backwards down the bed.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ he asked.

‘What do you think?’ she replied with a saucy grin.

He chuckled. ‘Oh ... that. Well, don’t let me stop you, but why don’t you turn around so I can do you at the same time?’

‘A 69?’ she said incredulously.

Harry frowned. ‘Yes, why? What’s wrong with that?’

‘Well,’ she said, shifting her gaze to the bedspread, ‘some guys don’t like doing that. You know, to me. I think they all like blowjobs!’

‘For fuck’s sake.’ His tone startled her, and she looked back at him, wide-eyed. ‘That ex of yours really was an asshole, wasn’t he? Do you like it?’

He softened his tone at that last, and she nodded. ‘Well then, get that sexy arse of yours up here, because I fucking love it.’

Heat rushed into her cheeks, more from arousal and anticipation at his words than from any embarrassment. Bloody hell, she thought, I’ve really struck lucky here, haven’t I?

She moved next to him on the bed, then shuffled up towards where his head lay on the pillow.

‘Come on,’ he said, giving her backside a playful slap. ‘Hurry up, I want to taste you.’

His words spurred her on, and she slung her leg over his head, moved into position, and carefully lowered herself onto his face, not wanting to squash him. She’d only just found the guy, the last thing she wanted to do was cause death by suffocation. That would be a tricky one to explain.

Shaking her head to rid herself of her mildly silly thoughts, she leant down and propped her elbows either side of Harry’s hips, making sure she could reach his cock.

‘OK?’ he said.

‘Yep.’ She gave a swift lick of his shaft. ‘I’m ready.’

His hands came up and around her thighs and gripped her bottom. Then, as he pulled her down so he could reach her pussy, she took hold of the base of his shaft, holding it still, and closed her lips around the tip. The resultant moan he gave vibrated onto her pussy, sending sparks of pleasure rushing through her.

Then, on some unspoken signal, they both began their sexy tasks. She flicked her tongue around the sensitive head of his cock, coating it in plenty of saliva. When it was nice and slippery, she sunk her lips onto him and moved slowly down and down.

Her movements had made Harry pause for just a second, but to his credit, he regained his composure quickly and continued to dance his tongue between her folds, touching all of her most sensitive places ... except for one. He deliberately avoided her clit, instead licking up all of their mingled juices, then pointing his tongue and penetrating her shallowly with it.

She cried out, the sound muffled and garbled by his dick, and decided to up her game further. Perhaps if she drove him wild, used all of her skills to propel him rapidly towards orgasm, he’d stop teasing her and give her what she really wanted. There was only one way to find out. Moving one of her

hands past the base of his cock, she cupped his balls and rolled them gently, listening for any sounds he might make, and paying careful attention to how his body reacted. A sharp intake of breath and the further thickening of his shaft told her everything she needed to know.

She began to bob her head up and down on his cock, concentrating hard to keep the suction on and to also stimulate his balls at the same time.

Initially it made him pause again, his tongue just maddening millimetres from where she wanted it to be. But then it seemed he came to the conclusion that if she was going to go for it, so was he. His fingers dug ever tighter into her cheeks, the pain adding an extra layer of sensation to that already taking over her body. Then he plunged his tongue into her cunt one final time, before moving – finally – onto her swollen and needy clit.

She couldn't help it; a sigh of satisfaction escaped her throat, and the vibrations around Harry's shaft added further fuel to his erotic fire. Precome seeped from his tip, the unique taste coating her tongue and making her eager to coax more from him before their session was done. Just a little, though; she didn't want him to come in her mouth – not this time, anyway. Their quickie in the kitchen had been hot and sorely needed, but right now she was indulging in foreplay with the intention of having him inside her pussy again, and looking into one another's eyes as they bucked and thrust their way to blissful oblivion.

It seemed Harry had no such qualms about making her come – she was very glad she was a woman, meaning orgasms didn't stop the action – as he closed his lips around her distended bud and pulled it into his mouth. Without even a moment's pause, he started to suckle her, gently at first, then harder when she'd had a few seconds to get used to it.

From then onwards, what they were doing morphed into some kind of competition. The harder he sucked her clit, the harder and faster she sucked his cock. Rude sounds filled the room, mingling with the moans and groans until, finally, Sydney jerked her mouth off of Harry's cock with an audible pop.

'Oh fuck,' she said, pulling in a sharp breath through her nostrils, 'I'm going to ... uhh ... come!'

Harry's skilled mouth continued to work, sending her over the edge fast and hard. The build-up was sharp; the lazy tingles she usually experienced bypassed entirely and replaced with a rapid tightening of her abdomen,

which equally speedily gave way to her release. She bunched her fingers into the duvet, holding on tight to reduce the risk of her flying away on the heavenly sensations.

Hot nectar flowed from her, and only then did Harry release her clit, busily lapping up her juices as she swore, spasmed and trembled over him.

‘Let go,’ she said, then, realising it had barely been a whisper, she repeated herself more loudly. ‘Let me go, Harry. My legs are about to give way.’

He did as she asked, helping her to flop onto her back and gain a couple of minutes respite to recover from her climax.

‘You all right?’ he said, his face suddenly appearing over hers.

‘Yes,’ she said, giving him a dopey grin. ‘Just, you know, phew!’

‘What’s scary is that made no sense at all, and I still knew what you meant.’ He dropped a kiss onto her damp forehead. ‘So, uh, you reckon you’re fit to carry on? I’ve got something that needs taking care of.’ He nodded towards his still-erect cock and gave a hopeful smile.

‘Yeah, as long as you go on top until my legs start working again.’

‘It would be my pleasure.’ He gently pulled one of her legs outwards so he could clamber between them. Then he worked his way up her body, nudging her thighs further apart until he was settled, his knees between hers and his hands either side of her chest, propping him up. ‘OK?’ he asked, butting his erection up against her slit so she couldn’t mistake what he was really asking.

‘Yes,’ she said, reaching up to grip his biceps, ‘I’m ready when you are.’

Shifting his hips around a little, he managed to aim his wide head against her entrance without using his hands. Then, pressing into her slick folds, he gasped as her cunt gobbled him up. ‘Fucking hell, you’re so damn tight. And you feel amazing.’

‘Ah ... you do too –’ The last word morphed into a gasp as a shallow, fast jerk of Harry’s hips butted his cock against her G-spot. ‘Ooh, that was good. Do it again.’

He wasn’t all the way inside her, but he did it anyway, repeating the small, sharp movements so every thrust shoved his cock, at the perfect angle, onto her G-spot. The direct stimulation was amazing, and she could feel herself swell around him.

Apparently, so could Harry. ‘Oh God. That’s just ... perfect.’

Sydney could see the strain on his face as he struggled to continue at the depth and speed that achieved such delicious pleasure for her, when what he really wanted to do was sink balls-deep into her cunt. She decided to give him what he wanted ... sort of.

‘You know, if you keep doing that as fast as you can, I’ll probably have a G-spot orgasm.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘I confess I know what one is, but I’ve never felt one around my cock, so I’m more than willing to give it a go.’

‘I haven’t finished,’ she said, getting a chagrined look from Harry in return. ‘If you can do that for me – and you’ll definitely know when you have – then you can fuck me as hard, as fast, and as deep as you damn well like.’

His answer was a pause. His entire body froze and he pulled in a deep breath. ‘OK,’ he said, giving her a cheeky smile. ‘I’ll do my very best.’

She hung on tight, lifting her head slightly so she could watch his cock – wet with their juices – pump in and out of her, fast and shallow, each backward movement in danger of making his cock slip out altogether. She hoped it didn’t – the sensations in her G-spot were too damn good.

She looked back up at his face, and their eyes met. By now, she was too far gone to smile, speak, or even think, so she just gazed up at Harry, riding on the delicious waves ebbing and flowing through her body. Then she felt the tell-tale sensation, the uncontrollable tightening of her cunt, making her want to push, and push damn hard.

‘Oh fucking God,’ Harry said. ‘It feels like you’re going to pull my cock off.’

‘I bloody well hope not,’ she replied, struggling to get the words out as her eyes rolled back in her head and bliss overtook her, juices forcing their way out of her, pushing past Harry’s shaft. It wasn’t the same as a clitoral orgasm, but it was still damn good and the release made her feel dizzy and silly, like she was a little drunk. ‘Mmm ... I think you’ve earned your reward, sweetheart.’

Her body hadn’t even got over one bout of pleasure when Harry began to take his, fucking her – and himself – into oblivion until their yells grew so loud and abandoned that even the thick walls of the barn would not stop the outside world hearing them. Sydney didn’t care either. All she could think about was what was happening right then, as clever movements on Harry’s



part sent her spiralling into another, more conventional climax, even as his cock leapt and spurting inside her. She was wrung out, rendered limbless and mute, and she hovered somewhere between sleep and wakefulness for some time until Harry stroked her hair away from her face and kissed her.

‘That was ... indescribable. Literally.’

She managed to give him a weak smile, when all she really wanted to do was go to sleep. Or fuck him again. Either thing would be fine.

‘Hey,’ he said softly, ‘I hate to do this, but the builders just turned up. I’d better go and see what their plan is for the day and chivvy them along. Do you want to come back to my place with me? You can work in my spare room and you won’t be disturbed. Unless you want to be, that is.’ He winked at her.

‘Yes,’ she said, his words having forced her brain to concentrate and to wake up. ‘That would be great, thank you. Can I go and have a shower first? If you don’t want to wait, I can always walk if you tell me where to go.’

‘Don’t be silly. I don’t mind waiting. I haven’t got an awful lot to do today, really. Just go food shopping, go and price up some appliances for next door when it’s ready, and phone my kids. I’m saving the best bit until last.’

She grinned. The love in his eyes when he spoke about his children was endearing. *He* was endearing. ‘OK. I’ll be as quick as I can.’

## Chapter Nine

Sydney could have walked, easily. Monthiers was a pretty small village and Harry's house was barely a minute's drive away from the barn. She knew where she was going now, and it definitely wasn't worth driving her car. Plus the walk would do her good. She'd suggest it after today – if he left a key somewhere for her, she could let herself in.

'Welcome to my humble abode,' Harry said as he pulled the car onto a driveway in front of a beautiful big house.

She raised her eyebrows. 'Humble? Bloody hell, if this is humble I wonder what you class as posh.'

He smiled. 'Come on, let's get you set up. I don't want to hold up your writing up any longer.'

Sydney wasn't sure if she'd embarrassed him with her comment, or whether he didn't know what to say, or simply didn't want to talk about it. Either way, she got the impression that, had she been a gold digger, she'd have truly landed on her feet with Harry. The house – which was his holiday home, not his permanent residence – was bigger and nicer than even the largest property on the street she lived in back in England. She knew houses were cheaper in France, but it was still an impressive building, and as someone that appreciated architecture, she very much looked forward to seeing inside.

She wasn't disappointed. After unlocking the door, he ushered her inside. 'Come on,' he said, 'I'll show you around quickly, then help get all your stuff arranged in the office.'

'OK, thanks.' She gave his arm an affectionate squeeze as she moved past, the laptop bag on her shoulder and tote in her other hand preventing anything more physical.

'Right,' he said, taking the largest bag from her and heading up the stairs, 'let's put these down first.'

He led her into a room on the third storey which was nestled between the eaves. The window overlooked the garden and some of the countryside beyond it.

‘Wow,’ she said, putting her laptop bag down on the table he indicated, ‘this is stunning. And this is one of your spare rooms?’

Harry nodded. ‘Shelly and I really struck lucky with this place. When we were looking to buy, property over here was incredibly cheap. The kids were little and we weren’t sure if we were going to have any more or not, so we thought this would be a nice size. Of course, it feels bloody enormous to me now, especially when the kids are back in England. But the market being what it is, it makes no sense to sell it now. And it is a beautiful house.’

‘It really is. Thank you so much for letting me work here.’

‘It’s no problem, the least I can do. OK, want to see the rest of it?’

She agreed, and Harry led her, room by room, through the property. They finished up in the kitchen, by which point she was already feeling a little lost and wondering if she could remember where the nearest bathroom was to her temporary office.

‘So,’ Harry said, leaning on one of the work surfaces, ‘can I get you a drink before I head out? Then of course feel free to help yourself if you want anything else.’

‘Yes, please. Do you have any cold drinks?’

He went to the fridge and pulled open the door. ‘Yep. Orange squash, apple squash, various juices ... Come and have a look.’

She went over and peered into the cavernous fridge, grabbing a carton of apple juice then turning to ask where the glasses were. Harry was so close behind her that she shrieked and almost dropped the juice. She shot him a mock-sowl. ‘You made me jump!’

‘Sorry. Let me get you a glass.’ He leant forward and pressed a quick kiss to the tip of her nose before moving off to get the promised receptacle. ‘If you need another while I’m gone, they’re in here, OK?’

‘OK,’ she said, taking the glass with a murmur of thanks. She poured the drink and put the carton back.

‘Right, do you want any breakfast before I go?’

Given their earlier activity, she ought to have been ravenous, but for some reason she wasn’t. ‘No, I’m OK, thanks. I’ll grab some of that fruit if I get hungry.’ She nodded to the bowl on the table.

‘Help yourself. I have cereal and bread too, if you want some toast. I’m not sure how long I’ll be out. It depends on traffic and how busy the damn

car parks are.’ He opened a drawer and pulled out a notebook. The top page already had writing on it – it looked like a list from where she was standing. ‘Right, what sort of thing do you want for lunch? And dinner. If you’d like to stay for dinner, that is. I’d love it if you did.’ He looked at her almost shyly, and for some reason that made her feel shy too.

‘I don’t want to be any trouble.’ She dropped her gaze to the floor.

‘It’s no trouble. It’s my fault there’s noise at the barn, so I invited you here. And while you’re here, I’m going to look after you the best I can. Just make sure I get an acknowledgement in the novel, all right?’ He winked at her, his awkwardness seemingly gone.

‘OK,’ she said with a grin. ‘Lunch and dinner would be great. You know I eat pretty much anything, so just surprise me. In fact, whatever you’re good at cooking would be fantastic.’

‘A wise choice,’ he replied. ‘Though I have got a damn sight better at cooking in the past few years. By necessity, of course. I didn’t want my children to either starve or have to live on microwave meals and takeaways. Social services would have been called in!’

‘They’re lucky kids. It’s obvious you adore them.’

‘Of course I do. And you will too.’ He ripped the top page from the notebook, folded it, and put it into his pocket. Moving over to her, he pulled her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her lips that almost immediately left her wanting more. God, a couple of sessions with the man and she’d turned into a raving nymphomaniac.

Mind you, she thought, as they exchanged goodbyes and he grabbed his keys from the side before heading out, it’s hardly surprising. He’s gorgeous, kind, intelligent, mature ... The list went on. And he was hers – pretty much. They still had lots to discuss, but providing they could come to an agreement, the future was bright.

She watched from the window as he reversed off the drive and onto the quiet street, then drove away. Sighing, she realised she was actually, in a way, relieved he was gone. If she tried to work, knowing he was downstairs, she’d probably just have wanted to go to him and ravish him all over again. As it was, she had complete and utter peace and quiet, perfect solitude, to finally get some words down.

Moving over to the door, she flipped the lock, then took her juice up to her temporary office. She made short work of setting up her laptop and her

notes, then pulled up the document. After a few quiet moments to get her head in the right place, she began to type.

It seemed the small room at the top of Harry's gorgeous house was the perfect location to write, because she became so engrossed in her task that she didn't stop, didn't look up until a noise startled her. She jumped, churning out the second lot of gobbledegook onto her manuscript:

*Ladnklad 89 ehwkhfw ieeo*

Turning around, she came face to face with a sheepish-looking Harry. 'I'm so sorry,' he said, holding a laden plate out in front of him. 'I thought you'd heard me come in. I've been as quiet as possible, but this house is pretty creaky. Anyway, I brought you lunch. A late lunch, admittedly, but it seems you haven't missed it.'

Sydney glanced at the clock in the corner of her laptop screen. 'Crikey, I didn't realise it was that late.' She smiled gratefully as Harry placed the plate down next to her. 'Thank you, this is great. You don't have to wait on me, though. I'd have come down when my stomach started complaining.'

'I know,' he said, reaching over to pick up her empty glass. 'But I said I'd look after you, and I will. Want a refill?'

'Mmm, yes please,' she replied, looking at the goodies on her plate. Sandwiches on delicious-looking thick white bread, breadsticks, some salad, pickled onions, and a couple of slabs of cheese. 'I'd absolutely love a cup of tea too, if you don't mind. I'm happy to come and get it, though, if you're busy.'

'No, it's OK.' He put a hand on her shoulder. 'I've done my chores now, and of course I can't ring Marcus and Roxanne until they're home from school. So I'm totally at your disposal. One cup of tea, coming up.'

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head, then left. She looked again at the food he'd brought her, wondering where on earth to start. Hunger dictated she didn't take too long to decide, and by the time Harry came back up the stairs, she'd demolished half a sandwich, some of the salad, and was munching on a breadstick.

He put the glass of juice and cup of tea down, then pointed at her laptop. 'May I?'

She nodded, her mouth full.

He leant forward and scanned the words on the current page. It was only the tiniest snapshot of the book, but when he finished reading, he looked

impressed. ‘Wow. You are one good writer. Your book’s not even aimed at me, and just from reading that little bit, I’m intrigued.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, having swallowed what she’d been chewing. ‘You don’t have to be nice, though.’

‘I’m not. Well, I am, but I mean it. I’d love to read the entire manuscript when you’re done.’

‘You can, if you like. It’ll be a little while before I have a version I’m happy to submit to my publisher, but you can read it then, if you want.’

‘Yes, that would be great.’ He grabbed a piece of cucumber from her plate and popped it into his mouth. There was silence for a few seconds while he chewed it. ‘Right,’ he said, ‘I’m going to leave you to it and go and get my own lunch. Give me a shout if you need anything. I’ll do dinner for seven. Is that all right? Or would you prefer earlier or later?’

‘Seven is fine, thank you. I probably shouldn’t work any longer than that, anyway. It’s not good to be sitting in one position staring at a screen for that long.’

‘That’s true. I could shout you at six and we could go for a little walk through the village before we eat?’

‘That would be lovely. Thank you again.’

He inclined his head, then turned to leave. ‘Oh,’ he said suddenly, turning back, ‘do you want me to switch on the WiFi and give you the password?’

‘No,’ she said firmly, ‘absolutely not. The temptation of email, social media, and news sites will be too much. I won’t write nearly as much with all that at my fingertips. So that’s a polite no thank you.’

‘Understood. I’ll call you at six, if I don’t see you before.’

‘OK. See you later.’

With that, he left her in peace. She ate her lunch as she read back through the last chapter she’d written, making tweaks here and there. By the time she’d finished eating, she was raring to get some new words down. She moved the empty plate out of the way, as well as her two drinks, then started to type furiously, pausing only to sip her tea once it had cooled a little.

Barring loo breaks, she didn’t stop until Harry came up behind her, placed his hands on her shoulders and gave them a gentle squeeze.

## Chapter Ten

‘Come on, workaholic,’ he said. ‘It’s six o’clock, and time for a little walk. Probably another cup of tea first, though.’ He pointed to her empty mug and glass, and she tilted her head back to look at him, suddenly feeling every inch like she hadn’t moved a muscle since lunchtime.

‘No, thanks,’ she said, letting out a long breath. ‘I think I’ll have one when we get back from our walk. If I have one now I’ll just want to veg out. Let me save and shut down.’

He waited patiently as she saved her document, then closed down and unplugged the laptop. Carefully closing the lid, she turned and asked, ‘Is it OK if I leave it here until tomorrow? I can’t be tempted to work in the middle of the night, then. I’ve done it in the past, and it pretty much always comes out as crap. I’m definitely not the sort of writer who can pull all-nighters. I like my sleep too much!’

‘Of course, that’s no problem. Though ... I was kind of hoping you’d pull an all-nighter with me.’

Standing, Sydney turned and put her hands on her hips, fixing him with a *look*. ‘Are you being rude, Mr Bay?’

He grinned. ‘Do you want me to be?’

‘Abso-fucking-lutely. Now let’s go for that walk before we get distracted.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

They made their way down to the ground floor, where Harry quickly checked that everything was progressing correctly with their dinner. Then they headed out, hand in hand.

Passing through the streets, Sydney figured that – builders and church bells aside – this was the noisiest Monthiers got. A few cars pootled past, presumably villagers returning home from work. A couple of them waved at Harry, and he waved back. A handful of small children raced around, taking no notice at all of the adults.

‘Wow.’ Sydney grinned as the little ones screeched and chattered excitedly to one another, ‘I can’t imagine it being like this back home.

Parents are too scared to let their kids out of their sight.’

‘That’s why I like it here so much. It’s so safe. When Marcus and Roxanne are grown up, I may well end up moving over here permanently. But it wouldn’t be fair on them if I did it now. Back home they’ve got friends, family, choices. I imagine they’d be bored stiff over here. Of course, they like it well enough when they visit during the school holidays, especially since I don’t feel I have to watch them every minute, but that’s a relatively small amount of time, and I make the effort to take them out to places. God, the money I’ve spent at Disneyland Paris.’ He brought his free hand up to cover his face. Behind it, Sydney could see his exasperated expression.

She laughed. ‘I can imagine. Those places are never cheap, especially when you’ve got children.’

He shook his head, then smiled. ‘They’re worth it.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’

They fell into a companionable silence as they walked on, past properties new and old, large and small, plus the tavern, which appeared to have only one customer. They passed the barn and saw that the builders had cleared out. Harry said he’d pop round in the morning when they were back, for another status report. They smirked at one another as they remembered what had happened that very morning, before he’d done just that.

Soon they ran out of village to wander through, so they turned and made their way back to Harry’s place. As they went inside, delicious smells assaulted their senses, and Sydney couldn’t help but comment. ‘Oh my God, is it seven o’clock yet? That smells gorgeous!’

Harry gave a mock bow. ‘Thank you, madam. Though to be fair, you haven’t tasted it yet. It could smell divine and taste disgusting.’

‘True, but I’m willing to take the chance.’ She sat down at the table, which had already been set.

‘In that case, can I get you a drink while I’m finishing up?’

‘Yes please. Do you have wine?’

‘I sure do. Any preference?’

‘Nope. Whatever you have open is fine.’

Harry gave a nod, then reached into the fridge and pulled out a bottle. She watched as he yanked out the cork and poured two glasses, bringing one over to her before replacing the now almost-empty bottle in the fridge.



‘Thank you,’ she said, holding up the glass and tilting it towards him for a toast.

Harry picked up his own glass, crossed the room, and clinked it against hers.

‘Cheers.’ They spoke in unison and shared a smile.

Harry took a sip of his drink, then put it down on the table. Turning back to the work surfaces, he grabbed the oven gloves and tugged open the door. ‘OK,’ he said, giving her a spectacular view of his backside as he bent over, ‘it’s ready. Prepare to be amazed or disgusted.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be the first. You’re just being modest. Can I do anything to help?’

‘Nope. You just chill out, you’ve had a busy day.’

She said nothing, merely doing as she was told and smiling politely several minutes later as the plate was put down in front of her. ‘Oh wow. No wonder it smelled nice!’

He’d made a shepherd’s pie. ‘I was going to say I’d done it so we could have a taste of home. But I admit that I’ve made this simply because I know how. I’ve done it a couple of times, so it should be OK. Let me know if not and I can do something else.’

‘Sit down, Harry. I think it’s going to be absolutely perfect.’

Now it was his turn to do as he was told, and he moved into the seat opposite her and took a sip of his drink before picking up his cutlery. ‘Hey, don’t wait for me,’ he said. ‘Dig in.’

Sydney did just that, sticking her fork into the gravy-covered dish and bringing it, loaded, to her lips. Steam wafted off it, so she blew on it a little before popping it into her mouth. Immediately, the flavours of the simple yet delicious dish exploded on her tongue and she moaned with pleasure, rolling her eyes back in her head. She opened them a few seconds later, the morsel swallowed, to find Harry giving her a very concerned look.

‘That was a happy moan, right?’

‘One hundred per cent. Can’t you tell the difference?’

He shook his head.

‘Well,’ she wiggled her eyebrows saucily, ‘then you obviously need more practice, don’t you?’ Her expression made her intent clear, and the corners of Harry’s lips quirked up, then shifted into a full-on cheesy grin.

‘Yes, ma’am, I think I do. Just as soon as we’ve eaten this and I’ve phoned my little monsters, I’m all yours.’

Various parts of her reacted to his words. Her body stirred at the implication of their words – she figured she wouldn’t be going back to the barn that night. Her heart swelled because, even though their conversation was distracting, bordering on the erotic, he didn’t, not for one minute, forget his children. She hoped to become as important to him as they were. Not to compete with or replace them, hell no, but to be ... dare she say it? ... part of the family. She didn’t have much experience with children of any age, but for him, she’d do her absolute best to make friends with them and have them accept her as their father’s girlfriend. Maybe more than that, one day.

She shook her head. She shouldn’t attempt to run before she could walk. There was plenty to work out between the two of them before it even got to the stage where she’d meet Marcus and Roxanne, let alone be a part of their lives more permanently. In an attempt to avoid further conversation – mainly because she didn’t know what to say – she tucked into her meal with relish, merely exchanging the odd smile and glance with Harry until she was done eating.

When he was finished too, she offered to clean up. ‘Let me do this while you go and talk to the kids. It’ll give you some privacy.’

‘I’m looking after you, remember?’

‘Yes, and you’ve done a fantastic job so far, but I’d like to give something back, if you don’t mind.’

‘OK. But I just want you to know that I don’t need privacy. I really hope you’re going to meet them soon, and in the not-too-distant future.’

‘Me too,’ she said, moving out of her chair to stand next to him. Pressing a kiss to the top of his head, she continued, ‘I just hope they like me.’

‘They will. They have good taste, just like their father.’

‘I hope you’re right.’

‘I am. Now stop worrying. Are you sure you don’t mind doing this?’

‘Of course not. It’s not exactly hard work. You’ve got a dishwasher!’

Harry laughed as he stood up. ‘That’s true. Well, just come through into the living room when you’re done. Please don’t feel like you’ve got to wait out here until I’m done talking with them.’

‘OK, I will. And I’ll bring more wine.’

Harry took her hand and tugged her towards him. Enveloping her in a huge hug, he loosened his grip only to lean down and capture her lips with his. The kiss was smoking hot and laden with meaning and intent, and when he finally pulled away, Sydney found herself blinking rapidly, her mind and body in severe danger of going into meltdown.

‘See you soon,’ Harry said quietly, pressing a much more chaste kiss onto her lips, before turning and heading into the front room.

Sydney’s response was to move over to the sink as fast as her shaky legs would carry her, turn on the tap, and splash cold water onto her face. She really needed a chill between her legs as well as on her face, but she wasn’t about to be caught in that kind of bizarre position in someone else’s house. Even if that someone was the reason she was all hot and bothered in the first place.

As much as she hated herself for thinking it, she hoped he wouldn’t be on the phone for long. She had serious needs. Ones she wanted Harry, and only Harry, to see to.

# Chapter Eleven

Sydney didn't know whether she was delighted or terrified at the prospect of Harry coming back out of the en suite bathroom. Once he'd finished talking to his children on the telephone, he had halted her lustful advances with a serious conversation. The gravity of his tone had dampened down her arousal and she'd listened to his words and responded with some of her own. The sum of their words amounted to a little of what they'd said before, and also some fresh thoughts. Mainly that Harry wanted – at some point – for her to move in with him in Cambridge. He wouldn't take his children away from their school and their friends, which was the only reason he wasn't offering to move up to Wolverhampton to be with her. There were still several years to go before it was up to the children to make their own decisions and start their adult lives, and Harry knew he was asking her for a lot – to make such a big change and be uprooted from her own life.

He'd also said he didn't want her to respond to what he was saying. He wanted her to take it all in and think about it in her own time. The last thing he wanted was to put pressure on her and upset her or scare her away. She appreciated that. It was something that had crossed her mind more than once over the past couple of days, and she'd shoved the thoughts away, determined to try and have fun and not worry about the future. She knew the worry would come, though, and it would come soon.

On top of all that, she couldn't help thinking about how crazy the entire situation was. They barely knew one another! Granted, she knew his full name, date of birth, his children's names, the cause of his wife's death, some of his hobbies, and so on. But she didn't know what his favourite colour was, and, now that she thought of it, she couldn't even remember if he'd told her what he did for a living. It was total insanity to know so little about someone yet be contemplating moving over a hundred miles to be with them. It was hardly moving to another country or continent, but it was still a bloody long way to go if it wasn't going to work out between them.

The click of the bathroom door pulled her from the maelstrom of thoughts. Harry was clearly much happier about the situation than she was – or he was just better at hiding it – because the grin on his face and the almost predatory way he approached her indicated that he was ready to reconvene what she'd attempted to begin downstairs, before their talk.

His hair was damp and he wore nothing but a towel around his waist. She had to admit, it was a good look for him, and one that was doing a damn good job of chasing the difficult thoughts from her head. They disappeared entirely when he dropped the towel.

‘See anything you like, Miss Tyler?’ His pale eyes glinted with mischief.

Instead of responding with words, Sydney reached down and pulled off her socks, then made short work of removing the rest of her clothes. She shuffled backwards up the bed so her head was resting on the plump pillows, then she crooked her finger and beckoned him.

‘I’ll take that as a yes,’ Harry said, climbing onto the bed and moving up to her. Instead of getting right up to the pillows and positioning himself beside her, though, he stopped at her feet. Grabbing her ankles, he pushed them apart then crawled up between her legs. He lightly trailed his fingers across her skin, and when he got to her inner thighs, he elicited a pleasurable shudder.

‘I’ve been wanting to do this all day,’ he said, lying down on his stomach and then pushing her legs further apart to reveal her spread and already slick pussy. ‘You, my sweetheart, have a delicious pussy, and I am very much looking forward to tasting it again.’

He wasted no more time on words, instead burying his head in her crotch and letting out a loud and guttural moan of satisfaction as his tongue dipped between her folds and tasted her juices. He murmured something against her skin. She wasn’t 100 per cent sure, but it sounded something like ‘God, you taste so fucking good.’ His actions certainly gave that impression, very clearly, even if his words had been muffled. He licked and sucked at her cunt with relish – not to mention extreme skill – and, before long, she grew incredibly close to climax.

Her hands fisted in the sheets as he teased and pleased her. When he pulled her swollen bud into his mouth and sucked on it, she quickly went over the edge, jerking, pulsating, and calling his name over and over. Lights

flashed behind her eyelids and it took a few seconds for her to realise that Harry was speaking to her.

‘Sydney. Sydney. I’d really like to fuck you now, if you don’t object.’

She shook her head rapidly, then realised that might be misconstrued. Clearing her throat, she told him, ‘No, I definitely don’t object.’

He entered her with no further preamble, his shaft slipping easily deep inside her. Then, surprising her, he reached for her, then manoeuvred them both until he was kneeling on the bed, his bottom resting on the backs of his legs, with her sitting atop him.

‘I – I can’t move yet,’ she said breathlessly. ‘J-just give me a minute.’

‘You don’t need to move,’ he replied, kissing the nearest patch of skin, which happened to be her breast. ‘Just hang on tight.’

She quickly wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his back. And not a moment too soon, for then he started to move and proved that he had the fitness and strength of a man many years his junior. He pumped up into her, fast and hard, causing her to bounce up and down on him like a rag doll. The angle their bodies were at drove him deep inside her, the tip of his cock brushing against her cervix with every move.

‘Unh.’ Harry’s face screwed up in concentration. ‘It seems I’m still out of practice at this – because I really want to come.’

A breathless giggle escaped Sydney’s lips. ‘Well, you’re more than welcome to practice on me.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’ With that, they both stopped talking. The only sounds they made were the sexy sounds of fucking. Panting, moaning, groaning, growling.

Soon, Sydney’s second climax took over her. She stiffened, the dead weight she provided making it even harder work for Harry. But she couldn’t help it. This orgasm was even more powerful than the first, and her walls clenched powerfully around her lover’s shaft. He let out a series of expletives and strangled moans before joining her in bliss.

‘Fuck!’ he said, gently lowering her onto the pillows, then curling up beside her. ‘That was ... I dunno ... I’m speechless.’

‘There’s a first time for everything,’ she said sleepily, getting a playful jab in the ribs in response.

‘Cheeky mare. You’re lucky I like you.’ He slipped his arm beneath her head and she happily rested it on his shoulder. Despite his quick words, his

hormones and the exertion overtook him, and before long his breathing changed, signalling that he'd succumbed to sleep.

Sydney longed to do the same. She felt dog tired – a combination of several hours at the computer, her mind and her fingers working away, the short walk, the heavy conversation and the considerable sex they'd just had. Sleep was exactly what the doctor ordered right at that moment. And yet, it eluded her. She wanted to toss and turn and try to force slumber to come, but she couldn't, wouldn't. She'd disturb Harry. It had been a while since she'd shared a bed with someone, so she hadn't had to consider her fidgeting for some time.

She moved her head slowly to look up at his face. He, much to her satisfaction, looked happy, content. But he had just had sex, so it was to be expected, she decided.

She closed her eyes. Then, as minds are wont to do, hers wandered rapidly over a number of random subjects. The first one of any consequence was Harry, and their current situation. Given their earlier chat, she was pretty sure they were on the same wavelength. They weren't going to commit until they'd spent more time together, made sure that what was between them could last longer than a fortnight in a foreign country. Made sure that it wasn't just a fling, a holiday romance, a French affair.

Sydney hoped not. It made her feel totally and utterly unhinged for feeling this way so soon, but she was pretty sure she was falling for him. That's why it was sensible that – sex aside – they'd take things slowly. The last thing she wanted was another failed relationship and a broken heart.

That wasn't her only concern, though. Although her feelings for him were powerful, and she knew he was very fond of her too – he had to be, to suggest what he had – she couldn't help but wonder if she could make him happy. She hadn't given birth to Marcus and Roxanne, and he'd always have that part of his late wife there, as a reminder. Could she live up to the legacy of a dead woman? Could she be a good enough partner? A good enough wife? Or would he, weeks or months down the line, realise he'd made a terrible mistake and that she could never compare to Shelly, the woman he'd loved with his entire heart, body and soul, and continued to do even after she was no longer of this world?

'Hey,' he said quietly, making her jump. 'Are you all right?'

She was glad that the room had darkened since they'd curled up together, the sun long past the horizon. 'I'm fine, why?'

'Your breathing was heavy and fast. It sounded like you were really stressed out about something. Were you dreaming?'

'No. I haven't been to sleep.'

'Why not?'

'I couldn't drop off.'

He repeated his previous question, then added, 'Do you want to talk about it?'

'About what?'

He stroked her hair. 'About whatever's bothering you. And please don't lie. I've been around the block a few times. Even in the pitch black I can tell when there's something bothering someone.'

Sydney let out a heavy sigh. 'My mind's just been going crazy.'

'Tell me.'

She did. Not about the silly, inconsequential things, of course. But about the things that really mattered. The things that apparently made her breathing pattern change and disturb his sleep.

By the time she finished, Harry had slipped from beneath her and switched on the bedside lamp. He tugged the covers from under their bodies and threw them over the top, covering her up, then gathering her to him and holding her tight.

'Listen to me, sweetheart. I can't stop you thinking those things. I know I can't, and it drives me crazy. But I guess I can understand why you're thinking them. It's different when a wife or a husband dies to when they separate or divorce. And I've always been up front with you about the way I felt about Shelly. But you have to remember that when I removed my wedding ring, I also threw away the part of me that was clinging onto the past. She's gone, she'll always be gone. But equally, a part of her lives on in Marcus and Roxanne and in our hearts and memories.'

He paused.

'But that's nothing for you to worry about. I can't wipe her out, I wouldn't want to. But what I do want to do is spend the rest of my life with you. Create more memories together. Me and you. Hopefully one day, the kids too. As a family. Maybe even have a kid or two of our own. Sydney, I know it's been a ridiculously short amount of time, but you've stolen my



heart. Really made me want to move on, to be with someone else. To be happy. I don't want to scare the shit out of you, but I think I'm falling for you. It's been so long that I've almost forgotten what it feels like. But I'm pretty sure that's what's happening.'

A tear slipped from the corner of Sydney's eye and rolled down the side of her face and into the pillow beneath her head. She wasn't quite sure why she'd begun to cry, but she figured it was happiness, not sadness, that was inspiring such emotion in her. So she decided to let it be. Happiness was to be embraced, encouraged, and she hoped that she'd find a great deal more of it with Harry.

'I'm falling for you too, Harry.'

'Well,' he said, holding her tighter and shifting so his lips were just millimetres from hers, 'thank fuck for that.'

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